

# Violence against refugees at EU external borders increases dramatically

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Serious human rights violations continue at the EU's external borders. Illegal pushbacks, deprivation of liberty, beatings and sexual assaults are now part of the standard repertoire used by the European Union to repel refugees.

On October 3, this year, 19-year-old Abdullah El Rustum Mohammed almost paid with his life for this criminal policy. On that day, the refugee from the civil war in Syria tried to cross the Bulgarian border from Turkey in a larger group of refugees to seek protection in the EU.

However, the group was intercepted by Bulgarian police and taken back to the border fence. A riot then ensued there; some refugees swore at the police officers, and some stones were thrown. Then a Bulgarian military truck appeared with more border police, who first fired warning shots and then shot directly at the refugees. Abdullah was hit in the chest and collapsed.

Other refugees provided first aid and managed to get Abdullah to a Turkish hospital, where he was immediately operated on. The projectile missed his heart by a hair's breadth. "If the bullet had destroyed the vein, I wouldn't be alive now. It is a miracle. I never thought I would be shot at. In a country that calls itself European," Abdullah told broadcaster ARD a few weeks later.

A refugee had filmed the incident with his mobile phone. The video has been forensically analysed by the Netherlands-based research platform Lighthouse Reports and presented to an audio expert, who confirmed Abdullah's statements. According to these, the shot must have come from the direction the camera was pointing—from the Bulgarian side of the border.

The Bulgarian Interior Ministry has confirmed an incident at the border but denied border police had fired at refugees. Speaking to journalists, Interior Minister Ivan Demerdzhiev claimed, "There are no incidents of violence against refugees. There is no evidence that a Bulgarian border police officer fired a shot, and there have been no acts that violate human rights."

However, in early November, Demerdzhiev had indirectly ordered border police to shoot at refugees after a Bulgarian border police officer was shot dead by two suspected drug smugglers. When asked by journalists whether the border police would dare to shoot, Demerdzhiev replied, according to the Euractiv website, "I will personally take responsibility, and they will dare."

He reiterated this stance to ARD: "Migrants who try to enter our territory illegally are becoming more and more aggressive. In some cases, they use stones, knives and other weapons. A Bulgarian police officer was killed. Those who expect our police

not to react to these acts and not to protect the lives and health of Bulgarian border police officers are mistaken."

Indeed, Bulgaria's border police are known for their brutality against refugees. In May this year, Human Rights Watch documented the illegal ejection of refugees through violence and the use of police dogs at the Bulgarian-Turkish border.

Last week, WDR television magazine *Monitor* showed footage of crates in which asylum seekers are locked up by the Bulgarian border police. Together with European media partners and the research platform Lighthouse Reports, the journalists investigated witness statements and found a barracks where refugees were locked up in rooms with bars. They were led there by refugees from Afghanistan and Syria, who told of their horrific experiences with the European border guards.

"The Bulgarian police set dogs on us, which bite us. And they beat us, they are very brutal. They beat us with wooden sticks before sending us back to Turkey." They were also imprisoned, he said. "We were kept in a terrible barred shed. It stinks there like a dirty toilet. It's like a cage, everything there is dirty."

This cage is located off the beaten track at a Bulgarian border police station. The refugees are sometimes locked up here for days, without a toilet, without food and with only a little water to drink. Then they are dragged back to Turkey without a chance to apply for asylum.

Legal scholar Constantin Hruschka of the Max Planck Institute in Munich told *Monitor*, "One thing is the inhuman and degrading treatment. And the second is the unlawful deprivation of liberty. Because people simply cannot be detained without trial and deprived of their liberty. Especially if the deprivation of liberty is then used to return them unlawfully across the border."

## Common practice on the Balkan route

Setting up lawless spaces to illegally imprison refugees, humiliate and abuse them is not solely a specialty of the Bulgarian border police, but a widespread practice across the Balkan route, which is covered up and encouraged by the European Union. Bulgarian border police are massively supported by Frontex, the European border management agency, whose officers are also on duty at the police station where *Monitor* discovered the cage with

refugees.

In Hungary, border police maintain containers in which they cram refugees and squirt them with pepper spray before driving them back across the border to Serbia in illegal pushback operations.

In Croatia, minibuses without windows serve as cells for refugees. One woman refugee told *Monitor* how she was held in such a minibus for hours in the intense heat: “The bus has room for eight people, but they put in 20, with children, 25 people in it. They just kept us in it for four hours. We were getting worse and worse. Then you start throwing up in the bus. And then they start driving, very fast. When they brake, you fall over each other, you vomit on each other.”

Such a procedure is torture and a blatant violation of the European Convention on Human Rights.

Croatian border police were supported by Frontex from 2016 to 2021 and equipped and trained by German officials. Research by the Border Violence Monitoring Network, a coalition of refugee aid organisations, together with ProAsyl, found that 129 German federal police officers with a Frontex mandate and 24 German liaison officers were stationed in Croatia over five years. The German police officers trained Croatian border police in 87 seminars, and Germany also supplied vehicles, thermal imaging cameras and surveillance technology worth almost €3 million to the Croatian border guards.

In particular, support was provided to Croatian intervention police, who are tasked with picking up refugees behind the border and driving them illegally back across the border. These units can be seen on video footage systematically beating refugees with a special multifunctional baton, the tonfa.

The massive expansion of violence against refugees at the EU’s external borders is also shown in the *Black Book of Pushbacks*, published by the Border Violence Monitoring Network. An update contains 733 new interviews with refugees who refer to pushback operations that deprived more than 16,000 refugees of their right to seek protection in Europe this year and last year.

One example is the experience of a 36-year-old Syrian who, together with his eight-year-old son, was picked up by the Greek border police from a small group of refugees near the border river Evros.

All of them had to hand over their mobile phones and were forced to strip down to their underwear. Those who refused were beaten. Together with refugees from Morocco, Afghanistan and Somalia, they were held for hours in a dark room with a filthy toilet.

The refugees were then beaten up, loaded into a minibus, and taken back to Turkey in the dark across the Evros River. During the whole time they received neither food nor water, there was no medical care or interpreters. And at no time did the refugees have the chance to present their right to asylum under due process.

Hope Barker, co-editor of the *Black Book*, says of the massive expansion of violence and human rights abuses at the EU’s external borders, “In the beginning, it was just isolated, sporadic events, but now it’s a widespread, systematic crackdown on refugees.”

## EU continues pushbacks

Despite the abundance of evidence of scandalous crimes at the EU’s external borders, the EU Commission and EU member state governments persistently deny any human rights abuses. For example, in July of this year, Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis declared that it was “the right of every EU member state to protect its borders while respecting fundamental rights.”

Even when OLAF, the EU’s anti-corruption agency, proved in a report that the Frontex EU border agency had systematically supported and covered up illegal pushback operations in the Greek Aegean and the central Mediterranean, Frontex interim director Aija Kalnaja claimed her agency had complied with all applicable rules: “We would like to reiterate that Frontex operations in the Aegean were carried out in accordance with the applicable legal framework.”

When the brutal pushback operations by Croatian police in 2021 could no longer be denied, EU Domestic Affairs Commissioner Ylva Johansson declared that “violence at our borders” was “unacceptable, especially when it is structural and organised.” In fact, illegal practices at the EU’s external borders continue to be tolerated and encouraged.

Human rights organisation Bulgarian Helsinki Committee counted at least 2,513 pushback operations at the country’s border with Turkey in 2021. Greek human rights organisation Aegean Boat Report has recorded a total of 1,860 pushbacks of refugee boats in the Aegean alone since March 2020. As a result, 49,237 men, women and children have been denied the right to seek protection in Europe.

More than 2,100 refugees have already lost their lives at the borders of the European Union this year. At least 1,982 people have drowned in the Mediterranean, 367 of them in the eastern Mediterranean between Turkey and Greece. One hundred thirty-six refugees died at European land borders, most of them at the Turkish-Greek and Turkish-Bulgarian land borders and in the Western Balkans.

German Interior Minister Nancy Faeser nevertheless called on the EU Commission in October this year to “stem the rising illegal migration via the Balkan route.”

In doing so, Faeser tries to play off refugees from Ukraine against other refugees, whom she defames as “illegal migrants,” even though they have fled wars instigated by the imperialist powers in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq and other countries. Faeser said, “We have a joint responsibility to stop illegal entries so that we can continue to help people who urgently need our support.”

The Conference of EU and Western Balkan states, which met in Albania on December 6, decided to tighten border security with massive support from Frontex. For refugees, this can only result in more violence, internment, humiliation and illegal returns.



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